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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 002133

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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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SUBJECT: INTERIOR MINISTER REVEALS ABDULLAHS' WHEREABOUTS
AND REASON FOR ARREST, AS CIVIL SOCIETY DEBATES ON WHAT
ACTION TO TAKE

REF: DAMASCUS 001358

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)
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¶1. (C) SUMMARY: More than a month after their detention by unidentified security forces, Interior Minister Bassam Abdul Majid has revealed to human rights lawyers the whereabouts and reasons for the arrest of prominent civil society activist Ali Abdullah and his son Mohammed. The two men, currently held at Sednaya prison, were arrested at the request of Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) chief judge Faez an-Nouri because of their advocacy work near the SSSC during court sessions. Their initial trial, over which Nouri will preside, has been set for June 18 at the SSSC. A second son, Omar, is also being held at Sednaya prison, together with other members of a secular student organization. Civil society activists note confusion about the cases among both authorities and the civil society community, which has been criticized by some activists for being too hesitant in its reaction. Meanwhile, activists note that the Abdullahts' case has dissuaded some would-be activists from continuing their work. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) INTERIOR MINISTER REVEALS SSSC CHIEF'S COMPLAINT AS REASON FOR ABDULLAH ARREST: A delegation of three human rights lawyers and the wife of prominent civil society activist Ali Abdullah met with Interior Minister Bassam Abdul Majid on May 1 to discuss the March 23 disappearance (reftel) of Abdullah and his son Mohammed. The meeting followed the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) April 30 announcement that set the father's and son's initial court date for June 18 on unspecified charges, the first evidence in over a month that the two men were still alive. According to human rights lawyer and activist Rezan Zeituneh, who attended the meeting, Abdul Majid revealed that Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) judge Faez an-Nouri had requested the two men be arrested because of their weekly presence outside of the SSSC proceedings. (NOTE: While diplomats and lawyers are allowed to observe SSSC trials, the press and the general public are barred from entry. However, a number of human activists and prisoner family members hold vigil near the courthouse, monitoring the results of cases, applying for visitation permits to Sednaya prison, and (in some cases) hoping for a glimpse of a relative. Zeituneh, Mohammed Abdullah, and (since his November 2005 prison release) Ali Abdullah are among the activists who have most regularly attended. END NOTE).

¶3. (C) During the meeting, Abdul Majid related that Nouri had accused the Abdullahts of speaking badly of the court and of Nouri personally and asked for their arrest. Abdul Majid told the delegation that the activists' presence near the

SSSC is illegal and that Nouri was justified in his complaint. As for visitation rights for Mrs. Abdullah, Abdul Majid told her she must apply with Nouri like any other prisoner's family. Abdul Majid concluded the half-hour meeting by telling the lawyers that they were welcome to meet with him as individual Syrians and lawyers, but not as human rights activists, as such activism is illegal in Syria.

14. (C) Abdul Majid's meeting with the Abdullah delegation marks his first official meeting with human rights activists since taking office in February. When asked why she thought Abdul Majid had agreed to the meeting, Zeituneh noted that she was left with the impression that he is "very weak" and seemed to be taking directions from Nouri. Nouri's power may even extend to carrying out such arrests himself: human rights activist Anwar Bunni speculated to Poloff in late April that the as-yet unidentified security agents who arrested the Abdullahs may have been from Nouri's "private" cadre of security officers, a group of which includes one of his sons. Zeituneh added that Nouri's ability to wield such power over the Interior Minister is not surprising, given Nouri's power and corruption. She pointed to the example of one of her former clients, who (in her judgment) was clearly guilty of espionage but whose family had paid Nouri 500,000 SYP (about USD 10,000) to release him, and paid a similar sum to have his record expunged.

15. (C) OTHER SON ALSO IN SEDNAYA: Zeituneh added that Abdullah's other son, Omar, is now also held at Sednaya prison, together with seven other students connected to a secular student discussion group. Zeituneh told Poloff that the family of one of the other students had received a phone call from an unidentified security agent, informing them that the students were in good physical condition.

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16. (C) NO UNITED CIVIL SOCIETY VOICE: Throughout the period of the Abdullah's disappearance, civil society organizations were divided on how to react. While a number of organizations, including the Atassi Forum and SWASIAH, formally called for SARG authorities to produce information about the whereabouts and well-being of the Abdullahs, other groups were much quieter. Bunni noted his "disgust" that the Damascus Declaration (DD) group had not made a statement on behalf of a prominent fellow activist. Veteran activist and DD signatory Haithem al-Maleh dismissed claims by Bunni and Zeituneh that more action was necessary because the Abdullah case was somehow special due to the Abdullahs' prominence and the fact that three members of the same family had been detained almost simultaneously. Researcher and civil society activist Radwan Zyadeh noted to Poloff on May 1 that while the majority of DD signatories had favored making a statement, at least one signatory other than Maleh had argued against it, saying that the DD did not need to release a statement for one individual. Zyadeh added that the DD group was still discussing the issue.

17. (C) DISAPPEARANCE AFFECTING OTHER CIVIL SOCIETY EFFORTS: The Abdullah case has cast a long shadow over the work of the civil society community. The recent announcement of the death in custody of accused Islamist Mohammad Shaher Haysa had raised concern that the Abdullahs could meet a similar fate, a fear assuaged only by the court date announcement and the subsequent Interior Minister meeting. Meanwhile, Zeituneh's youth NGO, in which Mohammed Abdullah played a leadership role, is hemorrhaging members. According to Zeituneh, members are dropping out and refuse to come to meetings. They feel alone and fear that further participation could destroy their future. If prominent activists like the Abdullahs can disappear and "no one cares", the group members doubt that anyone would come to their aid and they "will go to prison for free."

18. (C) COMMENT: While individual activists succeeded in bringing the case to the attention of the international media

and human rights organizations, and in eventually confronting a SARG official on the case, civil society's inability to quickly and effectively organize a mass campaign on behalf of one of its most active (and universally respected) members reflects the success of the SARG's recent intimidation campaign against the opposition, as well as continued disunity among civil society organizations. Furthermore, the potential downside of the opposition's consensus-oriented decisionmaking processes was revealed: as with other recent Damascus Declaration decisions, the voices of one or two members seem able to block even relatively minor public relations actions. More disturbingly, the crackdown also seems to have curbed civil society's attempts to broaden its membership base and attract younger members to what is widely considered to be a movement of the middle-aged and elderly.

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